DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 482 679 SP 041 837

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TITLE	Leadership for Learning: State and National Accountability Policy Can Leverage Social Justice.
PUB DATE	2003-08-06
NOTE	18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (Sedona, AZ, August 5-8, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Democracy; *Disadvantaged Youth; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; Excellence in Education; Higher Education; *Instructional Leadership; Leadership Qualities; *Minority Groups; Public Schools; *Racial Bias; *Social Influences; Teacher Expectations of Students
IDENTIFIERS	Marginalized Groups; *Social Justice

ABSTRACT

Educational leadership for social justice is founded on the belief that schooling must be democratic and an understanding that schooling is not democratic unless its practices are excellent and equitable. Moreover, educational equity is a precondition for excellence. The failure to achieve universally effective education in U.S. society is known to be a correlate of failure to achieve social justice. By almost any measure, there continues to be serious differences between the level and quality of educational achievement for children coming from rich or poor families and from ethnic majority or some ethnic minority group families. It is important to achieve equal educational results for all children. Failure to do so will hamper specific groups from obtaining the fundamental, primary goods and services distributed by society--rights, liberties, self-respect, power, opportunities, income, and wealth. Education is a social institution, controlling access to important opportunities and resources. State and national accountability policy can leverage social justice. (Contains 32 references.) (Author/SM)

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Leadership for Learning: State and National Accountability Policy Can Leverage Social Justice

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A paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, Sedona, Arizona, August 6, 2003

Abstract

Educational leadership for social justice is founded on the belief that schooling must be democratic and an understanding that schooling is not democratic unless its practices are excellent and equitable. Moreover, educational equity is a precondition for excellence. The failure to achieve universally effective education in our society is known to be a correlate of our failure to achieve social justice. By almost any measure, there continue to be serious differences between the level and quality of educational achievement for children coming from rich or from poor families, and from ethnic-majority or from some ethnic–minority group families. We must achieve equal educational results for all children. Failure to do so will hamper specific groups from attaining the fundamental, primary goods and services distributed by society – rights, liberties, self–respect, power, opportunities, income, and wealth. Education is a social institution, controlling access to important opportunities and resources. State and national accountability policy can leverage social justice.

Leadership for Learning: State and National Accountability Policy Can Leverage Social Justice

Introduction

A concern for social justice is at the core of democracy (Lunenburg, 2003). The United States prides itself on being a fair and just democracy, a nation in which every citizen is to be treated equally in social, economic, political, and educational arenas. According to its Constitution, the United States seeks to establish "liberty and justice for all." In spite of these goals, U.S. society is composed of many inequities: rich and poor, educated and illiterate, powerful and powerless. Now in the first decade of the twenty-first century, educational leaders must continue to question whether they have an obligation to create a nation whose words are supported by the experiences of its citizens.

The Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution addressed the question of equal opportunity, declaring that: "no state shall deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." The mandate that people receive equal protection extends to equal educational opportunity. While this fundamental affirmation of equal opportunity has been part of American discourse since the inception of this nation and is found in the Declaration of Independence and other documents, inequities in the major social, economic, political, and educational institutions continue to exist in American society.

Inequities in schooling are among the social injustices with which educational leaders need to be most concerned (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004).

Although it has been a stated goal in the United States that all youngsters, regardless of family background, should benefit from their education, many students do not. Most schools do not teach all students at the same academic level. The U.S. educational system, to this day, is beset with inequities that exacerbate racial and class-based challenges. Differential levels of success in school distributed along race and social class lines continues to be the most pernicious and prevailing dilemma of schooling. Furthermore, there is considerable empirical evidence that children of color experience negative and inequitable treatment in typical public schools (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, & Koschoreck, 2001).

Many children of color find themselves marginalized in toxic schools that offer inferior education. These schools affect the opportunities and experiences of students of color in several immediate ways: They tend to have limited resources; textbooks and curricula are outdated; and computers are few and obsolete. Many of the teachers do not have credentials in the subjects they teach. Tracking systems block minority students' access to the more rigorous and challenging classes, which retain these students in noncollege bound destinations. These schools generally offer few (if any) Advanced Placement courses, which are critical for entry in many of the more competitive colleges. Furthermore, African American students are over represented in special education programs, compared with the percentage of the overall student population. More than a third of African American students (as compared with fewer than a fifth of White students) in special education are labeled with the more stigmatizing labels of "mentally retarded" and "emotionally disturbed". Conversely, four-fifths of the White

students (as compared with two-thirds of the African American students) in special education are much more likely to be labeled "learning disabled" or "speech impaired." African American males are more than twice as likely as White males to be suspended or expelled from school or to receive corporal punishment (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Jonathan Kozol, in *Savage Inequalities* (1991), described the inferior education received by minority students (particularly, African American and Hispanic Americans) – fewer resources, inequities in funding, inadequate facilities, tracking systems, low expectations, segregated schools, and hostile learning environments.

These related inequities, the persistent and disproportionate academic underachievement of children of color and their injurious treatment in our schools, are compelling evidence that the United States public education system remains systemically racist (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, & Koschoreck, 2001). This is not to suggest that racism is consciously intended or even recognized by educators; it is institutional racism that is systemically embedded in assumptions, policies and procedures, practices, and structures of schooling. Nevertheless, every day more that 17 million African American, Hispanic American, Native American, and Asian American children experience the effects of systemic racism in U.S. public schools (Skrla, 2001).

Systemic Racism in Schools

Racism in the United States includes a broad spectrum (individual, institutional, white racism, racial prejudice, interethnic and intraethnic hostility, and cultural racism to name a few (Donaldson, 2000). African American, Asian American, European American, Hispanic American, Native

American, and mixed racial categories all play a part within these subtle racist systems. However, the targets of racism in our schools and in society are people of color through both institutional and individual racism. Racial prejudice, individual bigotry, and institutional racism have devastating effects on students and society at large.

The disproportionate academic underachievement by children of color has been the driving force behind the current accountability policy in the United States. However, a shift in U.S. demographics would seem to exacerbate the problem of achieving educational equity and its attendant impact on social justice. The student population grows increasingly diverse, the teaching force remains predominantly white, and achievement of children of color continues to lag significantly behind their white counterparts (Hytten & Adkins, 2001).

Demographic trends indicate that growth in the nation's minority population will have significant implications for public schools. In 1990, the total population of the United States was 248.7 million and increased to 281.4 million in 2000, an increase of 32.7 million people (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). A significant proportion of individuals making up this increase are people of color. Demographic projections indicate that the nation's population will grow to 294 million by the year 2020. At that time, more than 98 million Americans, one-third of the nation, will be non-white (Hodgkinson, 2001). Moreover, students of color are the fastest growing segment of the school population and have been the least well served by the schools. The U.S. Census in 2000 reported that of the nation's 49 million elementary and secondary school students, 38 million were white; 8 million were African

American; 7.3 million were Hispanic American, and 2.1 million were Asian or Pacific Islanders. Experts project that the percentage of students of color in elementary and secondary schools will increase steadily during the coming decades from 30% in 1990, to 36% in 2000 and will reach 50% of the public school population in the 25 major cities in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

In general, similar demographic shifts have not occurred in the teaching ranks. Despite the changing racial makeup of public school students in the United States, 87.2% of the teaching force is white, 6.3% are African American, and 2.0% are classified as "other" (National Education Association, 2003). This often results in considerable cultural and social distance between middle–class white teachers and students of color. Young and Laible (2000) suggest that white educators and educational leaders do not have a thorough enough understanding of racism in its many manifestations, nor do they comprehend the ways in which they are perpetuating white racism in their schools. Short (1999) further summarizes the consequences of this mismatch between white middle-class teachers and students of color. She cites how teacher preparation programs rarely train teacher candidates in strategies for teaching culturally diverse students. The lack of familiarity with their students' cultures, learning styles, and communication patterns translates into teachers holding negative expectations for students, what some theorists refer to as "deficit thinking" (Valencia, 1997). And often, inappropriate curricula, instructional materials, and assessments are used with these students.

Murray and Clark (1990) found eight forms of racism operating in U.S. schools at all grade levels. They are the following: (1) hostile and insensitive acts; (2) bias in the use of harsh sanctions; (3) inequalities in the amount of teacher attention given to students; (4) bias in the selection of curriculum materials; (5) inequalities in the amount of instructional time provided; (6) biased attitudes toward students; (7) failure to hire educators and other personnel of color; and (8) denial of racist actions. These subtle forms of racism that exist in schools threaten the academic success of students of color. For example, denial of racist actions and attitudes, and biased education, policies, and hiring practices, are present in schools at all levels and adversely affect students' success in school. For example, Donaldson (1996) found that racist treatments affect the learning and development of students of color. The study confirmed that, as a result of racist treatment, students felt low self-esteem, causing diminished interest in school; a perceived need to overachieve academically; and guilt and embarrassment at seeing other students victimized.

Thomas Good (1987) reviewed the research on teachers' differential treatment of high-achieving students and at-risk students. He identified 17 teaching behaviors that are used with different frequencies with the two groups of students. These behaviors define a pattern of diminished expectations for at-risk students' ability to learn, and perhaps a lower regard for their personal worth as learners. The teaching practices are the following: (1) wait less time for at-risk students to answer questions, (2) give at-risk students the answer or call on someone else rather than try to improve their responses by giving clues or using other teaching techniques, (3) reward

inappropriate behavior or incorrect answers by at-risk students, (4) criticize at-risk students more often for failure, (5) praise at-risk students less frequently than high achieving students for success, (6) fail to give feedback to the public responses of at-risk students, (7) pay less attention to at-risk students or interact with them less frequently, (8) call on at-risk students less often to respond to questions, or ask them only easier, nonanalytical questions, (9) seat at-risk students farther away from the teacher, (10) demand less from at-risk students, (11) interact with at-risk students more privately than publicly and monitor and structure their activities more closely, (12) grade tests or assignments in a differential manner, so that high-achieving but not at-risk students are given the benefit of the doubt in borderline cases, (13) have less friendly interaction with at-risk students including less smiling and less warm or more anxious voice tones, (14) provide briefer and less informative feedback to the questions of at-risk students, (15) provide less eye contact and other nonverbal communication of attention and responsiveness interacting with at-risk students, (16) make less use of effective but time-consuming instructional methods with at-risk students when time is limited, and (17) evidence less acceptance and use of ideas given by at-risk students. According to Good, academic achievement is highly correlated with race and social class, which means that at-risk students are more likely to come from disadvantaged home backgrounds, whereas high-achieving students are likely to come from advantaged home backgrounds. Therefore, the differential teaching behaviors found by Good suggest a pattern of discrimination based on students' race and social class as well as their achievement level.

A recent Education Trust document (2002) concluded, "We take students who have less to begin with and give them less in school too." Darling–Hammond (1997) confirmed this data, making explicit reference to teachers in the schools. Being poor, being of color, being an inner city resident do not cause differences in educational achievement. Rather the lack of resources put into the education of some students and the inequitable treatment of children of color and low-income children are the major causes of difference and social injustice. And teachers are the most important educational resource available to students, according to Darling-Hammond.

In its simplest form, social justice is linked to redressing institutionalized inequality and systemic racism. Rawls (1971) argues that social justice is defined by four principles. The first is based on equality of treatment of all members of society (equal rights and liberties). The second is based on all people being regarded as individuals. The third involves giving everyone a fair chance (equal opportunity). The fourth involves giving the greatest social and economic benefits to those least advantaged. The application of these four principles of social justice to education would mean that more resources should be allocated to improve circumstances of those historically least served by the system rather than treating all individuals equally. The notion of social justice suggests that treating all people equally may be inherently unequal. Rawls argues that all education stakeholders are obligated not only to safeguard individuals' rights, but also to actively redress inequality of opportunity in education. This notion posits that educational leaders are obligated to examine the circumstances in which children of color and poverty are educated. Social justice in schooling then

would mean equal treatment, access, and outcomes for children from oppressed groups. It would mean closing the achievement gap between children from low–income communities and communities of color and their mainstream peers so they are successful in school. That is, it would mean that school success would be equitable across such differences as race and socioeconomic status. It would mean working toward such a vision of social justice in school by engaging the powerful force of accountability policy, that is, excellence and equity for all children.

Excellence and Equity

Educational leadership for social justice is founded on the belief that schooling must be democratic, and an understanding that schooling is not democratic "unless its practices are excellent and equitable" (Skrtic, 1991a, p. 199). Skrtic (1991b) asserts that educational equity "is a precondition for excellence" (p. 181). Gordon (1999) linked social justice to excellence and equity by arguing:

> The failure to achieve universally effective education in our society is known to be a correlate of our failure to achieve social justice. By almost any measure, there continue to be serious differences between the level and quality of educational achievement for children coming from rich or from poor families, and from ethnic-majority or from some ethnic–minority group families. Low status ethnic-minority groups continue to be overrepresented in the low achievement groups in our schools and are correspondingly underrepresented in high academic achievement groups. (p. XII)

We must achieve equal educational results for all children. Failure to do so will hamper specific groups from attaining the fundamental, primary goods and services distributed by society – rights, liberties, self–respect, power, opportunities, income, and wealth. Education is a social institution, controlling access to important opportunities and resources.

Education policy in the United States is dominated by accountability concerns. Public education issues are a top priority of national and state political agendas (Lunenburg, 2002). *The Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994*, the *Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994* (a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965), and the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* call for equal treatment, access, and outcomes for all children.

There are numerous reports that demonstrate that it is possible to find effective public schools where administrators, teachers, and parents collaborate to produce high achievement for all students. But these successes occur in only a small number of schools. We still cannot account for the fact that some students master academic content and many others do not. And there is little research on organizational design and practice in exceptionally high-performing school districts (Elmore, 2000). The available documentation does point to some common themes that high–performing school districts possess, but the knowledge base on which to offer advice to school districts and administrators on the design of sustained districtwide improvement processes is limited.

Government officials, academic scholars, business leaders, and the educational community have begun to look at state accountability systems to realize the vision that "equity and excellence need not be mutually exclusive goals" (Viadero, 1999, p. 24). Within the past 10 years a few examples of sustained districtwide academic success of children have begun to emerge in the research literature. These examples have appeared in states that have highly developed, stable accountability systems, such as Connecticut, Kentucky, New York, North Carolina, and Texas. There is evidence from these states and others that their accountability systems driven by state policy initiatives have improved student performance for all students (as measured by state achievement tests, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Advanced Placement (AP) exams, and ACT and SAT tests). In addition, there is evidence of narrowing of the achievement gap between the performance of children of color and low-income children and that of their white and more economically advantaged counterparts (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, & Koschoreck, 2001).

Preliminary research in some of these districts found evidence of common strategic elements in the way these districts managed themselves. Superintendents in high-performing districts exhibited a much greater clarity of purpose, along with a much greater willingness to exercise tighter controls over evidence of performance. They used data on student performance to focus attention on problems and successes; they built district accountability systems that complemented their own state's system; and they forged strong relationships with their school boards around improvement goals. They created a climate in which teachers and principals were collectively

responsible for student learning and in which the improvement of instruction was the central task. Incentive structures in these districts focused on the performance of all students, not just on average school performance. Superintendents realigned district offices in these school districts to focus on direct relationships with schools around instructional issues; and they focused more energy and resources on content-specific professional development (Elmore, 2000). The success of these school districts confirms the findings of Valencia (1997) that it is critically important for school leaders to reject assumptions of deficit thinking. Leaders who reject deficit thinking about students and their parents engage in what many theorists call "capacity building", helping people to acquire skills and dispositions to learn new ways of thinking and acting (Fullan, 2001). Darling-Hammond (1997) underscores the fundamental importance of capacity building skills on the part of educators when she states that the capacity to "achieve associations beyond those of any narrow group – to live and learn heterogeneously together" undergirds our ability to live in a diverse democratic society (Shields, Larocque, & Oberg, 2001)

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